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First published in the //Maha Bodhi//, Vol.92 nr. 7-9 (July-Sept. 1984),
and the //Light of the Dhamma//, Vol. III, nr. 4 (1984).
Also published in //Buddhism As a Way of Life and Other Essays//, 1993.
This DharmaNet edition published February 1995.

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LEADING VIRTUOUS LIVES AS LAYMEN

by Sayagyi U Chit Tin

Ashin Maha-Buddhaghosa discusses virtue (*//sila//*) in great detail in the first chapter of *//The Path of Purification//* (*//Visuddhimagga//*). He discusses in particular the virtue of the Sangha. The Sangha is of great importance as it will keep the Teachings of the Buddha alive. On one level, by Sangha is meant the Community of Bhikkhus that maintains the purity of the Dhamma in the sense of preserving the texts containing the Buddha's discourses (the Suttas), the rules for the bhikkhus (the Vinaya), and the analysis of mind and matter that is the highest expression of the Teachings in the most accurate language (the Abhidhamma); and in the sense of putting into practice those Teachings. On another level, the word "Sangha" refers to all those who have attained one of the four levels of enlightenment: Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami, Arahat. In this sense, laymen are included.

Ashin Maha-Buddhaghosa refers specifically to the Bhikkhu-Sangha in most of his discussion. This is because on the human level the Bhikkhu-Sangha is very important in keeping the Buddha's Teachings alive. When he goes into detail on how the rules for the Community of Bhikkhus are to be respected, this does not concern laymen except in so far as they will be more helpful in supporting the Bhikkhu-Sangha if they know the rules. But when Ashin Buddhaghosa discusses how the bhikkhus are to develop in virtue, these instructions can be very beneficial to laymen also.

Ashin Buddhaghosa, for example, cites a discourse given by the Buddha on the dangers of immoral actions. In the discourse the Buddha is addressing the bhikkhus but the same dangers exist for laymen as well.[1]

The Buddha described in seven vivid images the dangers of a bhikkhu breaking his virtue and, as an unvirtuous man accepting and using the requisites given by laymen. The unvirtuous man, he said, is evil-natured, of unclear or suspect habits, secretive about his actions, claims to be an ascetic but is not, claims to lead a life of purity but does not, is rotten within, lecherous and full of corruption.

(1) It would be better for a bhikkhu to embrace a burning fire that might burn him to death and cause great suffering but not lead to rebirth in a state of woe than to sit down or lie down with a woman, which results in the indulgence of the five cords of sense-desires.

(2) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to have a strong horse-hair rope twisted so tightly around his legs that it cut through to the marrow of the bone than to consent to letting laymen pay homage to him.

(3) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to be wounded in the breast by a sharp spear tempered in oil than to consent to the reverential salutation of laymen.

(4) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to be wrapped in a red-hot iron sheet than to accept robes given in faith by laymen.

(5) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to have his mouth prized open with red-hot iron tongs and that a red-hot ball be put in his mouth and burn through his lips, mouth, tongue, throat, belly and pass out below carrying with it his bowels and entrails than to use almsfood given in faith by laymen.

(6) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to be seated or laid on a red-hot iron bed or iron chair than to use a bed or chair given in faith by laymen.

(7) It would be better for an unvirtuous bhikkhu to be plunged upside down into a red-hot cauldron than to use a dwelling given in faith by laymen.

Ashin Buddhaghosa ends his chapter on virtue in //The Path of Purification// with a list of the advantages of maintaining virtue. The bhikkhu with immaculate virtue gives pleasure and inspires trust in wearing his robes and carrying his bowl. He need never fear self-reproach. He shines like the sun and moon. The colour of his body is pleasing to the Devas -- and even more so the perfume of his virtue, for the perfume of virtue is greater than all other perfumes as it spreads unchecked in all directions. Deeds, no matter how small, done for a virtuous man bear great fruit. None of the intoxicants can plague him here and now, and he digs out the root of suffering in future lives. If he wishes perfection among men or Devas, it is not difficult for him to attain it. But once his virtue is perfected, he seeks only the perfection of Nibbana.

"The mind of one who understands thus," Ashin Buddhaghosa says, "shudders at failure in virtue and reaches out towards the perfecting of virtue. So virtue should be cleansed with all care, seeing this danger of failure in virtue and this benefit of the perfection of virtue.[2]

We will see through first-hand experience that if we are not firm in our resolution to avoid situations that lead to breaking //sila//, then we will encounter situations that overpower us. As the English saying goes, "He who hesitates is lost." Even though, at times, we may be able to force ourselves to do the right thing, many times we could have avoided the situation entirely. If we associate with people who are going to tempt us, prod us to do things such as killing, stealing, lying, drinking, committing adultery, etc., we will be less likely to be able to avoid such actions. If we frequent places where such people are found, we are more likely to come under their influence. It is useless to pretend we can save such people or that we are there with them so that our good influence will guide them. There are already many difficult situations that cannot be avoided. As the results of actions done in past lives mature in this life, we will find ourselves unavoidably thrown into situations where there will be strong temptations. It is sufficient to confront these situations and use all our energy and determination to do the right thing then. We do not need to put ourselves in such situations on purpose.

This is why, on the one hand, the Buddha said associating with the Noble Friend is the whole of the life of the Dhamma, but, on the other hand, he laid much emphasis on the advantages of the life of solitude. A Noble Friend who will help us grow in the Dhamma is not always available. If we cannot be with such persons, we are better off alone. Even alone, if we practise the Buddha's teachings, we will not feel lonely, for at such times we are close to the Buddha, the best of all friends.

There are three levels of effort to make: effort with regard to physical actions, with regard to verbal actions, and with regard to mental actions.

Here are some examples of making an effort with regard to physical actions. Let us take //not killing// as an example. If our self-control is not very highly developed, we may not even notice our anger until we are on the point of killing. We may be sitting very still, meditating, when a mosquito lands on our hand and starts to bite. We feel the pain and our reaction is so fast, our level of awareness so dull, we do not notice we are about to do a wrong action till our hand is raised, ready to kill the insect. If we //do// become aware at that moment of what we are about to do, we can restrain ourselves.

But there are better ways of dealing with such situations. If we reflect before we begin to meditate and realise that there are mosquitoes around and that if we do not take precautions we will probably be bitten by one, then we can look for a place that is protected; inside a mosquito net, perhaps. Or we can look for something to protect us; we can cover up the exposed parts of our body. Or, if this is not possible, we can prepare ourselves for the moment the mosquito will come and resolve that we will not kill it. It can help to review what we have learned of the Buddha's Teachings; that we have gone through countless lives in which we have killed and have suffered for killing. If we are to escape from this vicious circle, we must put an end to killing. No amount of physical discomfort in this life can equal one moment of the suffering that will result in future lives if we do not stop killing now.

Once, during our teacher's time, the Venerable Abhidhaja Maharattha Guru Masoyein Sayadaw, Senior Abbot of Burma and President of the Chattha Sangayana, the Sixth Buddhist Synod, visited the shrine room of the Accountant General's Office, Yangon, on the occasion of a //swoon-kway// (inviting for a meal) hosted by Sayagyi U Ba Khin and his disciples. The //swoon-kway// was, in fact, the //dana// from two Indian students, Messrs. Venkataraman and Natarajan, who became Buddhists after meditating under Sayagyi. On this occasion, the Venerable Sayadaw was accompanied by an attendant who happened to notice Mr. Venkataraman in a state of deep meditation with rigid body and tight limbs, and who asked whether the latter would move if someone were to prick his body with a pin. To which Sayagyi replied, "Sir, we wouldn't attempt it, being afraid of Ariyarupantaraya if he is an Ariya.[3] But one thing I'm very sure of, that he could sit without moving in this hall at night with no covers on the body, just as he sits during the day. He can enter into this state at will for a predetermined period of time. Here, at the back of this building, there is a Hindu hotel which is very filthy. Workers throw all the rubbish and dirty water out the back where thousands of mosquitoes thrive and come up at night when students are sitting in the hall. It is a real hardship for the students, but Mr. Venkataraman can enter into states at will and can remain in one posture for three hours without moving." [4]

In later years, Sayagyi liked to recount this event, and he added some other details to the story. He told us that Mr. Venkataraman's father-in-law died in India in the late 1950s and he and his wife had to travel by boat to Calcutta. As he suffered from high blood pressure, Mr. Venkataraman had to be careful of his health and he usually got seasick on such journeys. So Sayagyi explained to him how he could overcome sea-

sickness by going into deep meditation for three hours. Three times in succession, after a full and hearty meal and with the knowledge of his wife, he did this and the method worked.

When Sayagyi met Venerable Webu Sayadaw in 1941, while visiting the Sayadaw at his centre in Kyaukse, he reported that the venerable monk came out of the door of his hut followed by a swarm of mosquitoes. Sayagyi's attendant, a railway assistant station manager, wondered how the Sayadaw could meditate inside his room with all the mosquitoes. At least meditation could help one to forbear such disturbances.[5]

Now let us look at an example of wrong speech. Perhaps out of ignorance, when talking to other people, we speak in favour of killing mosquitoes. We may say something like, "I can't stand being bitten by mosquitoes. Just the sound of them buzzing around is enough to drive me crazy." In speaking in this way we are admitting our lack of control, implying that we will not try to learn how to control ourselves, and we will be encouraging the taking of life. What we say may be used by the other person to feel justified in killing mosquitoes himself. And the more we speak in this manner, the less inclined we will be to make the right effort ourselves.

Right effort for thoughts is the hardest of all. We must have the highest level of concentration for this. But if we train ourselves to recognize as soon as possible the wrong thoughts that precede killing the better we will be able to avoid such actions. Whenever we begin to think of mosquitoes, we will tend to have negative thoughts if there is no control. But if we can recognize this as it happens, then we can begin to train ourselves to come back to the breath below the nostrils and the touch of the air coming in and out. Or, if this doesn't work, we can remind ourselves of the Buddha's Teachings, as we mentioned before.

The greatest aid in our daily lives will be learning to control the senses. This means exercising as much control as possible over the things we pay attention to. The more we control what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, the better we will be able to lead moral lives. This in turn will help us to concentrate better and appreciate //anicca// more fully. It will mean that our lives will be happier.

We should do our best to control our senses the way those who have attained at least the first stage of enlightenment do. In the Burmese commentary on the //paramis//, the importance of being mindful is pointed out.[6] Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, taking intoxicants and lying are all actions which lead to the lower planes of existence. Those who are Ariyas, who have reached at least the state of Stream-winner, never do such acts. Even if their lives are threatened they will not do such acts for they have eliminated the root of the tendency (//anusaya//) to do immoral acts. Observing the five precepts, which means abstaining from such acts, is necessary for all those who become Buddhists.

A layperson such as Mother Visakha, who was a Stream-winner, may have lawful sexual relations, eat after noon, dance and sing, etc., and use high and lofty seats and beds. But we should not take this to mean it is possible to indulge in such behaviour indiscriminately. To do so would mean that we would do so more and more and cultivate wrong view (//miccha-ditthi//). Ariyas do not use material things soliciting sense desire (//vatthu-kama//) in the same way an ordinary person does. In the

commentary to the //Anguttara-nikaya// (The Book of the Gradual Sayings), it is said that the Ariyan disciple approaches agreeable formations (//sankhara//) like a clean brahman who seeks safety in a dung heap from an elephant in rut. For the Ariya, the burning fever (of desire) is subdued, calmed. Ordinary people, on the other hand, generally enjoy sensual pleasures with wrong view.

The quicker we are able to turn away from things which provoke unwholesome reactions and actions, the better off we will be. In the world today, we are constantly surrounded by sights and sounds, etc., which encourage us to react in an unwholesome manner. Advertising can serve as a good example. On the most direct level, we may be encouraged by advertisements to kill. This would include ads which tell us to buy a certain insect spray in order to kill insects or a poison to put on plants in the garden. In more subtle ways, ads which romanticize hunting and fishing or being a soldier are an encouragement to killing higher forms of life, including human beings. Even when people think they are acting out of compassion for other people's suffering by advocating euthanasia, they are encouraging killing. The Buddha pointed out that trying to predict where a person who dies or is killed will be reborn is like trying to predict exactly where a stick that we throw up in the air will land. We cannot say that we have reduced anyone's suffering through ending his life.

The more we give attention to such advertisements the more our thoughts will be filled with the idea of killing. We will not be able to lead a normal life as laypeople and avoid all contact with such ads. But we can give them as little attention as possible. We can turn away from them whenever possible.

We are less likely to find encouragement to steal in advertisements in magazines, on the radio or on television. But more and more novels and movies today represent the heroes as being able to steal and get away with it. This may be justified in the film by depicting the hero as a sort of Robin Hood who steals from the rich and gives to the poor, but even that is not often the case. The hero steals to make himself rich. We can usually get a general idea in advance of the subject matter of a book or movie before we read it or go to see it. So, it should be easy to avoid exposure to such immoral propaganda.

One of the major themes of advertising is sexual indulgence. This powerful force is used by businesses to sell almost any product: cars, newspapers, cigarettes, alcohol, perfumes, jewelry, etc. Almost any product can be directly or indirectly associated with physical attractiveness. Our eyes will be constantly coming into contact with images which will arouse our sexual desires. The songs we hear will rarely have any other theme than sensual love with all the attachment, craving and suffering that it involves.

Advertisements will also set us a very bad example when it comes to right speech. Exaggeration is the rule rather than the exception. Implications which are not directly stated, and so can be excused as not being direct lies, get across the message the seller wants us to believe. If we use a certain product, we will be beautiful, stay young, etc.

Among the biggest advertisers are the makers of alcohol. Even though doctors tell us that alcoholism is one of the leading diseases of mankind,

very little is done to combat this disease when compared with the efforts made to encourage taking intoxicants. Even if we think that we are immune to temptation, exposing ourselves unnecessarily to the attractive image presented of taking alcohol will subtly break down our resolve or at the very least create tensions in us.

All these examples appeal to the six senses. Even when we are not in contact with such advertisements, we will find our thoughts turning to them. The better our ability to be conscious of the fact that the mind is indulging in unwholesome thoughts, the better we will be able to detach ourselves from them. We will be able to dismiss such thoughts and come back to the in-breath, the out-breath and the touch of the air below the nose.

We must make a conscious effort to minimize our exposure to all the encouragement around us to lead immoral lives. We can be more selective in the sorts of newspapers and magazines we read, in the books we read, the television programmes we watch and the movies we go to. We can avoid going to places where such temptations are found and we can avoid being with people who encourage us to break any of the precepts. This does not mean becoming sanctimonious or "holier than thou." We have friends and family for whom we are responsible. For them we can make every effort to be a good friend -- one who sets a good example and who encourages others to do good. But in situations where we are not responsible for other people, it is best to remember that in the ultimate sense each individual is responsible for his own actions. It is better to go our own way than to interfere and provoke ill will and agitation in ourselves and in others. On the other hand, we may find ourselves confronted with a situation we cannot avoid when we would be compromising the Dhamma if we did not speak out clearly and firmly. In such cases, we must stand steadfast.

We will sometimes find ourselves in situations where it seems impossible to avoid breaking one of the precepts. Even a Bodhisatta may decide to do such actions as going to war to protect the citizens of his country. Such decisions are very difficult to make, and we must be very clear and able to think correctly if we are to make a wise decision. Whatever we do we must never excuse ourselves, thinking that a good action can cancel out an immoral action. No matter how justified an immoral action may seem, it will result in future suffering. The Buddha said that even if we are being tortured to death, if we feel ill will towards those who are torturing us, we will suffer for it.

Studying the teachings of the Buddha can help us to avoid finding excuses for ourselves and help us to take responsibility for all our actions. The better we understand the Dhamma, the better we will be able to learn from our mistakes. We will stop blaming other people or circumstances for our wrong actions.

Bhikkhus, what is right effort? Bhikkhus, with regard to this the bhikkhu makes a resolution and an effort, mobilizes energy, concentrates and vigorously applies his mind in order that evil and inappropriate mental processes that have not yet arisen may not be produced. He makes a resolution and an effort, mobilizes energy, concentrates and vigorously applies his mind in order to expel evil and inappropriate mental processes that have already arisen. He makes a resolution and an effort, mobilizes energy, concentrates and vigorously applies his mind in order that skilful mental processes that have not yet arisen may be produced. He makes a

resolution and an effort, mobilizes energy, concentrates and vigorously applies his mind in order that skilful mental processes that have already arisen may be stabilized, gain clarity, reach full growth, development and completeness.

Digha-nikaya (II 312)[7]

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

FOOTNOTES:

[1] GS III 185f.

[2] This discussion is an extract from //The Perfection of Virtue//, Dhammadana Series 4 of the publications by the Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K.

[3] //Ariyarupa-antaraya// can be translated "endangering or causing harm to an Ariya." See pp. 14ff. in the biography of U Ba Khin by U Ko Lay. Also see "Men Seeking God" by C.P. Mayhew, MP, Great Britain; his Buddhist programme was televised by the BBC on the night of March 5, 1954 for half an hour. The then Chief Accounting Officer, Myanmar (Burmese) Embassy, London, reported to Sayagyi, in his letter dated April 5, 1954: "As a film it was excellent. However the time allowed was only 30 minutes (as for other religions) and I must say he could touch only the barest outline of Buddhism. The majority of Burmese residents in London saw the programme and were very impressed."

[4] Abhidhaja Maharattha Guru Masoyein Sayadaw took great interest in the work of Sayagyi's teaching meditation to Westerners and visited IMC-Yangon several times. When he visited in 1960, he saw the many letters of appreciation written by Western students regarding the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma and the fruits gained by coming to the centre, and he told Sayagyi that when these appreciations and experiences described by the students were published in the Myanmar language (Burmese) he would write an introduction, which he subsequently did.

[5] Webu Sayadaw was reputed to be an Arahat. He learned the scriptures under the above mentioned Sayadaw in Mandalay and then retired to the forest to practise meditation. He was given up for lost and his family was not able to trace him until he was seen in a forest near Kyaukse, forty miles south of Mandalay at a place popularly known as Webula Hill. He then took up residence at that place after the lay disciples in the vicinity built him meditation huts. Later on, they built him a meditation centre with many monasteries. He became known as Webu Sayadaw. Later his father came to visit him and asked him to return to his birth place, Ingyinbin village, where he afterwards founded another meditation centre.

In his earlier years, after he had learned the scriptures, he resided for a time in Shwebo, where another story of some interest occurred. The presiding monk in this place was older than Webu Sayadaw and for some time had been occupying himself with the question of who would be the best monk

to take his place as the presiding abbot of his monastery. This monk, who also practised meditation, was impressed with Webu Sayadaw's behaviour and his scrupulous observance of the Vinaya rules. The old monk decided to hand over the monastery to Webu Sayadaw and retire into the forest to practise meditation more effectively. But the day after he made that decision the abbot was approached by Webu Sayadaw early in the morning and the latter requested permission to leave the monastery and retire into the forest himself. "Well, monk (//avuso//)," the abbot replied, "you are quicker than I to decide to retire into the forest. What can I say? Please help yourself. May you gain the Deathless."

After he founded the centres at Kyaukse and Ingyinbin-tawya, Webu Sayadaw was approached by the lay disciples of Shwebo, sixty miles north of Mandalay, who asked him to honour them by taking up residence in their city, as he had spent his early days there. The Sayadaw agreed and founded a third large meditation centre at Aung Mye Yeikthar in Shwebo. He customarily spent four months at each of the three places mentioned, but he always spent the rainy retreats at Kyaukse. After Mahapavarana, the full moon day of Thadingyut, his period of residence at Kyaukse ended and he would leave for Shwebo to reside and teach meditation there for the next four months. Then he would go to his birthplace, Ingyinbin-tawya village, another twenty-five miles north of Shwebo, where he spent the last quarter of the year teaching lay disciples and monks who came from all over the country.

In 1953, he was invited by Sayagyi U Ba Khin to give blessings and preach the Dhamma at IMC, 31a Inya Myaing Road, and he came with some monks and some of his relatives, both nuns and laymen to reside for seven days in June before the Buddhist lent. Beginning in 1954, the following year, he was invited annually by the lay disciples of Yangon and Lower Myanmar to visit the capital and many other cities of Lower Myanmar. He became very famous as he was already reputedly an Arahat. He was also well-known for the simplicity of his Dhamma teaching, which could be understood by ordinary laymen and laywomen and which, in fact, appealed to everyone who heard it. See pp. 213ff. in the biography of U Ba Khin by U Ko Lay.

[6] See //The Perfection of Virtue//, "Virtue as two kinds(a),"pp.11-14.

[7] DB II, p. 344. Our translation is based on Rune E.A. Johansson's //Pali Buddhist Texts// (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, 2nd ed., 1977), pp. 84f. We prefer "vigorously applies" rather than "forces" for //pagganhati//.

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 Published by the Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, United Kingdom  
 Address as above, registered charity no. 280134  
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TITLE OF WORK: Leading Virtuous Lives as Laymen
FILENAME: LAYMEN.ZIP
AUTHOR: Sayagyi U Chit Tin
AUTHOR'S ADDRESS: n/a
PUBLISHER'S ADDRESS: International Meditation Centre, Splatts House,
Heddington, Calne, Wiltshire SN11 OPE, England
COPYRIGHT HOLDER: The Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K.
DATE OF PUBLICATION: 1984
RIGHTS & RESTRICTIONS: See paragraph below.
DATE OF DHARMA NET DISTRIBUTION: February 1995
ORIGIN SITE: BODY DHARMA * Berkeley CA 510/836-4717 DharmaNet (96:101/33)

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